Five Common MS Triggers and How to Avoid Them

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Avoiding MS Triggers and Flare-Ups

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is a random illness that can strike us down when we're least expecting it, but there are also certain things known to cause a flare-up or relapse of MS symptoms.

Five MS Triggers to Be Aware Of

No two people with MS are the same, and no two flare-ups are the same either. I have friends with MS whose symptoms are so different to mine that you'd think we had different conditions, but all MSers ought to be aware of common triggers that can cause a relapse.

Stress

We are all affected by stress, but having a chronic condition like MS means stress can have a more significant impact. Not dealing with stress can lead to depression and increased fatigue that can make our symptoms worse.

I went through a period of stress after my daughter was born which, looking back, I think contributed to my worsening disability. I was juggling a three-year-old with a newborn baby and trying to do everything myself.

Then, I went back to work too early and put too much pressure on myself. Before I knew it, my balance started to go, and my foot drop got worse, and I was forced to rest.

Fatigue

Symptoms always feel worse when I'm fatigued, and this can be physical or cognitive. My walking gets much harder when I feel physical fatigue, and my hands also refuse to work reliably.

If I feel cognitive fatigue, my thought processes are sluggish, and I find it hard to concentrate. Sleep and rest are important for everyone, but poor sleep can have an even greater impact on MS.

Infection

Any infection, such as a cold or flu, can cause a flare-up of MS symptoms. MSers need to wash their hands and generally look after themselves more than other people.

I remember having an alarming flare-up after my daughter was born and I could barely get from my bed to the bathroom. It turned out I'd developed an infection and needed a course of antibiotics.

I was back to normal a few days later, but I remember how frightened I was, especially as I was unable to look

after my baby on my own. MSers are prone to urinary infections due to problems with bladder function, so be aware and seek treatment as soon as possible, so your symptoms aren't made worse.

Heat

Anything that raises body temperature can trigger MS symptoms, so I am at my worst during the summer months. If it's too hot, nothing works, and I feel like I've swollen up from the inside out!

Luckily I live in the United Kingdom, so it rarely gets that hot, but I still seek out shade and air conditioning whenever I can! Other kinds of heat have a huge impact, too.

For example, I recently figured out that if I lower the temperature of my shower, I'm able to get out and get dressed without having to rest for half an hour. It took me so long to make the link, but apparently, doctors used to use the "hot bath test" as a way of diagnosing MS!

Food

For me, certain foods trigger my symptoms. Dairy seems to make the pins and needles in my hands worse, and gluten increases feelings of fatigue.

Everyone is different though, so food may not make any difference, but cutting out gluten and dairy has certainly helped me.

A lot of symptoms caused by the above are short-lived and recede when we cool down, rest or treat the cause; however, some relapses need to be treated with steroids, so knowing what causes fluctuations in your symptoms can help you know when you're having a more serious relapse.

Luckily we can avoid a lot of the common triggers and develop strategies to minimize their effects. I work part-time, for example, and make sure I factor in enough rest and downtime.

I also delegate tasks and rope in my children to help when I feel exhausted. It's important to pace myself and conserve my energy. I also avoid the heat and make sure I wear natural fibers to combat the effects of heat intolerance and generally keep myself as healthy and well as possible.